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ABSTRACT

In response to the segregation, stigmatization, and valorization that placement systems can cause, writing instructors at Ohio State University paired an honors class with a basic writing class. For each of 3 years, the paired classes met in adjoining computer-enhanced classrooms, and when the classroom dividing wall was opened, the students worked collaboratively in mixed-placement groups. The students followed the same rigorous curriculum. Each of the three paired classes was team taught and observed daily by graduate student ethnographers. In public presentation and discussion, several issues were raised: (1) should "honors" and "basic" students be mixed to avoid labels; (2) should students be told about the experimental nature of the course; and (3) should the assumption be that the "smart" honors students were supposed to tutor the "dumb" basic writers. Teachers found it as difficult as students to look beyond the stereotypes created by labels that the placement systems bestows. (RS)

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Pairing Honors and Basic Writing Students
A Step Toward Detracking First-Year Students

In most colleges and universities, placement systems channel beginning students into various first-year courses: into one class go all the "honors" students; into another, all the "basic" writing students--and into a third class and a fourth and a fifth sometimes go different students. Simple or complex, placement systems have arisen, to some extent, from the good intentions of educators. These good intentions are to create homogeneous groups of students so that instruction can be individualized according to students' differing needs--or their apparently differing needs.

Such segregation, however, is a form of tracking and is open to the same charges against it that educators have recently leveled against tracking in elementary and high schools. Among these charges are that tracking segregates students along socio-economic lines--and in this way reinscribes socio-economic hierarchies. A further problem with tracking students, particularly in English, is that most if not all tracking mechanisms are too primitive to create groups with similar writing skills. For example, our experience at Ohio State tells us that students placed in honors classes (on the basis of ACT or SAT scores) are not equally skilled writers. In fact, some need basic writing courses and would have placed into them had our placement system been more effective. Research from

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collaborative learning hammers away at the foundation of placement systems with different charges: collaborative work in heterogeneous--not homogeneous groups-- results in greater learning for **all** students (Branscombe and Taylor, Goodlad, Goswami and Stillman, Heath, and Oakes).

Recently, in Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose brought to the attention of the college composition community the negative consequences of institutional placement practices, practices that label and segregate groups of students, that stigmatize some and valorize others. They also have a role in ensuring the failure of those at the "bottom." Even more recently, at the national Conference on Basic Writing last October, several participants addressed the controversial nature of separate basic writing tracks, most notably David Bartholomae in his keynote address, "The Tidy House: Basic Writing in the American Curriculum."

In response to the segregation, stigmatization, and valorization that placement systems can cause, we have, at Ohio State, created an alternative. In each of the last three years, we have paired two first year writing classes, one class of honors and one class of basic writing students. The paired classes meet in adjoining computer-enhanced classrooms, and when the classroom dividing wall is opened, "the students work collaboratively in mixed-placement level groups--for peer editing, reading response and analysis, and generative inquiry. The students all follow the same rigorous curriculum. To date, we have designed two similar courses of study," one emphasizing ethnographic inquiry methods (which Beverly and Mary will talk

about today) and one emphasizing the relationships between literacy and culture. Both interweave written and oral data--from published pieces, from student writers, and from live "informants," like roommates; both investigate language use and meaning-making; and both question received definitions of literacy or culture. (FIPSE Grant Proposal, 7-8).

Each set of these paired classes has been team- or parallel taught, and each has been observed daily by graduate student ethnographers who keep field notes, work as participant-observers in the classes, conduct follow-up interviews with students, and help evaluate the pairing project in a number of ways. Kelly Belanger, our next speaker, was one of those ethnographic observers in our first paired classes. She speaks today from a slightly historical perspective.

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Pairing Honors and Basic Writers: A Step Toward Detracking First-Year Students?

Kelly:

Having been an ethnographic observer of the first paired section of honors and basic students, I was part of the first public presentation and discussion of this project at Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition in July of 1991. I'd like to take a few minutes to summarize for you a few of the significant questions and responses that our panel of several years ago received so that, if possible, our discussion today can move beyond those issues.

In that panel, like this one, a number of different perspectives on the paired classes were represented--that of teacher, administrator, and researcher. Whereas Suellynn, who just spoke, has been both a teacher and administrator, Beverly Moss and Mary Kuehner, who will speak momentarily have both--at different times--taught the "ethnography" version of the course, and myself and Jane Greer--again at different times--have served as ethnographic observers. Finally, Andrea Lunsford, who is serving as chair of this session and will also offer her perspectives today, was responsible for the orignal conceptualization of the project and--like Suellynn--was instrumental in making it happen administratively. The perspectives of other key people are unfortunately not represented today--Keith Walters was instrumental in designing the "ethnography" strand of the paired courses and Kay Halesak

first taught the "literacy and culture" strand. Susan Kates and Todd English have both been in-class ethnographers, and the students themselves are missing, although they have spoken about their experiences in the paired classrooms at other professional meetings.

Naturally, among this group of teachers, researchers, and students there have been varying interpretations of classroom events and even disagreements about the degree to which the paired classes were successful. One question that was raised at Penn State continues to be a source of concern for us all--an audience member asked us why we had not simply mixed students of different placement levels together in one class rather than pairing classes. That would make the most sense, she argued, if our purpose was really to downplay the labels "honors" and "basic." In fact, we decided to create paired classes primarily for administrative purposes, for to do it otherwise would have involved complications that would have postponed the project literally for years.

Audience members also wondered why teachers of both the honors and the basic course had chosen to tell students about the so-called "experiment" early on in the quarter, discussing with them reasons why it might be a good idea for honors and basic writing students to work together. Indeed, in that first pairing, students, segregated on their respective sides of the moveable wall, made and heard arguments that basic writers could in fact do the kind of rigorous work usually asked of honors students and that basic students could make valuable

contributions to honors students' educational experiences. Several honor students also suggested that they might learn from interacting with people different from themselves, people with different backgrounds and attitudes toward school. Certainly many of us involved in the first pairing hoped that the course would illustrate to students--as well as to ourselves and the academic community--that the labels "honors" and "basic" are at best problematic and worst detrimental to everyone's success.

In fact, in the three different versions of the paired courses that have been taught so far, each time the teachers have dealt differently with the issue of if and when it would be best to discuss the significance of the "honors" and "basic" labels. In the second pairing, the issue was not introduced by the teachers and was discussed by the whole basic writing class only after the issue was raised by students. The honors students never raised the issue for a whole class discussion, so it was never discussed in that setting. In the third pairing, the classes met together more frequently than before--everyday--and discussion of the "experimental" nature of the course took place with both classes present. Of course, because of the many different factors involved, we are still in the process of assessing the effect that openly discussing labels or not had on the classes.

Finally, in addition to being asked questions about the labels that provoked our thinking and encouraged us to consider different options, those of us on the Penn State panel also received some questions that, frankly, dismayed us. Despite

what we thought were clear explanations to the contrary, audience members seemed to insist on assuming that the paired course was set up so that the "smart" honors students could tutor the "dumb" basic writers. Specifically, they wanted to know what the honors students were getting out of the pairing since the basic writers certainly must be slowing them down. Didn't teachers need to slow down the pace at which they went through the curriculum for the sake of the "slow" basic writers? And what about grading? Were all students graded according to the same criteria?

We found such questions dismaying because the teachers, it seemed, found it as difficult or more difficult than the students did to look beyond the stereotypes that are created by the labels the placement system bestows. Later, though, these questions compelled us to reflect upon what our own blind spots might be. If nothing else, we gained a new respect for the complexity of the issues we were asking students to deal with at the same time that they were struggling with a challenging curriculum during their first year of college. The presentations that follow provide a closer look at the the struggles and accomplishments of the first-year writers who participated in the paired classes. They represent part of the ongoing process of answering the difficult but important questions this project raises.